

Giving voice to the *Speechless*:

Depictions of disability in television and identity politics of Disability Studies

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Relationships define us. As humans, how we see ourselves often is reflected in the relationships we have in our family, work or school environments and other social settings. Society defines gender, class, race and ableism roles of what is “normal” as part of self-concept in growth and maturation from childhood to adulthood.

Depictions in our narratives rely on unspoken, agreed-upon stereotypes and “norms.” These depictions can take the form of novels, biographies, or visual media of movies, TVs and documentaries. We rely on stereotypes or archetypes to give us a short hand into how to relate to characters in a narrative. Sitcoms, or situational comedies, in particular, use this shorthand to quickly connect to viewership tell their stories in a humorous way, often amplifying characteristics for the sake of the joke or plot-movement.

Disability Depiction in the Media/TV/Movies

In an informal poll of friends of mine, some educators, some not, through social media of Facebook and Instagram, I asked what different shows and movies are thought of that depict disability. What was generated was a long list that could build into richer research and analysis in a variety of ways in the future. (see Appendix B)

Some commonalities I noticed included the fact that movies were often personality driven, if the disabled character was the main character: a deep look at their life. On the small screen more often than not, the character with a disability, most often an obvious physical disability, fits into the role of “sidekick.” In examples of media depictions of lead characters, we often get the tragic or inspirational characterization; where disability often subsumes any full-faceted personality of the character. Many of the narratives in movies focus in on the one-character storyline and can fall into that trap of stereotypic portrayal easily.

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Rosemarie Garland-Thomson points out “it is important that these shows are understood as public conversation starters, and we pay attention to the very fact that disability is in there. It is a political and cultural issue. People with disabilities have traditionally been represented in the media in stereotypical and often discriminatory ways. There are several expected cultural scripts that get mobilized when media makes stories about disability. So we need to see what is the cultural work of these stories” (Hussain, 2017, p. 6). In few examples of TV shows from my non-scientific, non-exhaustive list, the disabled characters are part of an ensemble cast where the disability could be a major story arc but not the totality of the narrative. These examples focus on the relationships between family members, or friendships and interactions in society. Highlighting how they live their life that we can laugh at or cry over or both at the same time as we connect on a more regular basis to this narrative over weeks, months and years. We, the viewing public, and society connect with television because it lets us “see across” as the Greek and Latin roots implies. It lets us “see across” society connecting to families in their commonalities to us and see across differences in life experiences. Voyeurism of the lived-experience through the lens of that show’s showrunner and writers.

From the Show Runner: Speechless

As we will see in the case of ABC’s “Speechless,” a sitcom that premiered Fall 2016 in American Broadcast Company (ABC), the show’s creator, Scott Silveri uses his own experiences growing up in a family with a sibling with special needs. Silveri hopes to depict accurately the unique challenges a family with a child with special needs faces, bringing in a consultant Richard Ellison head of Cerebral Palsy Foundation to assist show writers. Ellison tells LA Times (2016) that he wanted the Speechless team to be aware “It’s cerebral palsy. You’re not going to get it right. The point is, let’s not get it wrong.” He goes on to report, “What the show is doing is being

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brave and honest and using humor to avoid pussyfooting around. It’s allowing us to start conversations that people are uncomfortable starting” (LA Times, 2016).

There is so much out there in critical media critique about accurate depictions of lived experiences by the people that form marginalized subgroups and who should play those roles and give life to the writer’s story. That is much beyond the scope of this paper, but calls for disabled roles to be played by disabled actors appears in the social conversation as often as movies and TV shows featuring disability as a main theme premier. Ask Micah Fowler the star of *Speechless* about his experiences in the role and he tells Aaron Broverman “it has helped (having Cerebral palsy) because I’ve lived with CP all my life and many things JJ goes through, I go through on a daily basis. Watching *Speechless* and knowing that JJ is played by an actor who has cerebral palsy allows people to get a real perspective, an inside look at what life is like living with CP. It lets them see the ups and downs, all the challenges and even the fun, humorous moments that we experience” (Broverman, 2016).

Character Types

In ABC’s *Speechless*, we are introduced to a variety of characters that go from the “type” that you experience in sitcoms to 3-dimensional personalities as you spend each week getting to know. Minnie Driver portrays a crazy, loving, over-the-top mom. One that school systems should fear in IEP meetings as an adversarial “momma bear” as Maya DiMeo fights for JJ’s rights and moves the family around to find the ideal school setting for JJ. The character Jimmy DiMeo is the dad that who plays mediator in the family dynamic, and is laid back, pulling mom back from the edge of the cliff, functioning as the foil to her high-strung antics. Ray and Dylan are the younger siblings whose interactions both between each other and JJ portray typical infighting of traditional family siblings. They also get to show how as siblings of someone with

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physical difficulties can experience exacerbated feelings of being left out of their parents’ attention at times due to JJ’s more extensive needs.

Kenneth, the “parapro” or family aide is our outsider in several different ways. As an outsider to the insular family dynamic, and highlighting cultural or racial differences of a black man functioning inside and as a voice in a suburban lower middle class white teenager. The fact that JJ chose him as his “voice” being male, and not the person his mother would have chosen shows JJ’s growing quest for independence that exemplifies a typical coming of age, maturation archetypal story. This is a great narrative device creating tension and a way to disrupt family patterns for plot/growth of the family dynamic.

All of these relationships help us define who we see JJ as, in his actions, agency, reactions to school, home and family situations in the community. It gives us a glancing track on who JJ is.

Some depictions outside the family are so far much more surface such as JJ’s school and stereotypic of a sitcom family opposed to the reality of schools today. So far the writers have given a pass to reality of schools depictions, academic learning struggles, use of appropriate AT (assistive technology). Given that this is a sitcom and not a documentary, there is a certain amount of suspended disbelief asked of the audience, especially in regards to the exaggerated examples of school life, clueless teachers, and antiquated use of assistive technology of a laser pointer with a printed communication board opposed to computerized voice output devices many children with nonverbal communication skills use today on a regular basis. Several speech teachers immediately pointed out this inaccuracy when I asked what they thought of the show. But I am willing to allow this sitcom conceit as another route to involve the characters with JJ in a more interactive way and creating ploy dynamics with Kenneth. As I was working on this

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research, one of the parents I reached out to for their input emailed me and asked if I had seen the latest episode (S1 Epi 17 “T-H-- THE C-L--CLUB”, Air date: 2-15-2017) where they actually used a voice output device. So it will be interesting to see if concerns in that direction have filtered to the writer’s room and that aspect will evolve in the story arc.

Reactions from an Insider’s View

I asked several of my friends who have physical disabilities and a parent of adult with physical disabilities their thoughts briefly on the show. One respondent is mother in a family of four with a son, 22, with cerebral palsy, nonverbal and uses electronic communication device, and a daughter 17 in a family “who has same aspirations, fun, vacations, relationships, kids in high school & college, who has same problems all other families have... but with one big difference and different problems” (personal communication, 2017). One other respondent is an adult, also with cerebral palsy, but verbal and milder on the continuum of physical impairment compared to the other respondent's son. He can use a walker but more often uses a non-power wheelchair. He has one able-bodied sibling, and two able-bodied parents. He is works in a professional field with an advanced degree. He tells me “my parents always treated (me) as though I were no different from my able-bodied brother” (personal communication, 2017).

When asked “have you seen people on TV and movies that look like you (or your child) or have some of the limitations you (your child) might experience?” he replied “rarely do I see someone with a wheelchair or with another disability. When I do, I holler at the T.V. “Guy in a wheelchair!” The only time I see someone with a disability on T.V. is when it is inspiration-porn type situation.” My mother respondent remarked that JJ has same limitations as her son in Speechless. Both replied they liked it because it mirrored what it was like growing up with CP.

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Relationships in situation comedies to give us sympathy, empathy and ability to see connections, broaden our understanding/awareness. This awareness transforms the boundaries of people with disability from 1 or 2-dimensional portrayals into a 3-dimensional fully-faceted persons. You could consider the fact we watch characters fully “bodied” change and grow dynamically over time 4-dimensionally. When giving insight to things that *Speechless* does well from an insider’s perspective, my female respondent liked JJ’s humor and personality. She saw many parallels with her son’s personality and that JJ was being included at school, friendships, and family situations. She said that this “show hits on so many “yeah that’s right situations” like the expenses of having a special needs child, advocating at school and community, friends, family and relationships” (personal communication, 2017). The male respondent’s perspective on the characters’ accuracy, given the magnification of personalities in a sitcom, pointed out that the mom, who is overly-assertive and Ray (younger brother) are the most accurate because “Ray is always trying to find a place in the events.” Whereas, the female respondent felt the mother’s role was a bit over the top exaggerated and didn’t like how the show portrayed the mom as a “crazy, outspoken, overbearing nut. But I understand her personality had to be exaggerated for the point to be made. Sometimes you have to look like an advocating nut to get your point across” (personal communications, 2017).

She also didn’t like how the communication device needs to speak out loud instead of people reading for him, which echoes the complaint I have heard from several speech language therapists. One point of speculation on my part, is this show-device allows an outsider, Kenneth, to shake up the family dynamic from a static position and encourage narrative conflict and plot growth as JJ negotiates his new school setting. If this is true, I can forgive the show runner’s device for sake of show narrative. One concern was how the house was depicted and the idea that

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because they have a child with a disability gives the family the right to be “shitty neighbors.”

This bothered one respondent.

The connection and depiction of relationships is essential to the chemistry and show narration of a good ensemble cast of a sitcom. Both respondents felt it was a good depiction of an able-bodied family with a child with a disability, even given the over-the-top characterizations. The mix of seriousness and humor in the relationships makes the show very watchable and poignant. There are nurturing relationships between siblings when they aren't fighting like sibling rivalries. As someone living the experience JJ does in the show, the male respondent felt it was a “great step forward with the progress and exposure of disabilities and disability rights. Now we need a show with a parent who is disabled, but has an able bodied spouse and able bodied children” (personal communication, 2017).

The mother surveyed summed up her experience by saying “the tv character, JJ & (her son) just want the same thing as everyone else does; Relationships, success, independence and a good life. Their family on Speechless and my family work together to make sure it's done and everybody is well adjusted and happy” (personal communication, 2017).

Identity politics and disability studies

Disability studies is both embedded and outside of critical pedagogy and critical curriculum studies. It both expands the borders of traditional counter-hegemonic theories, but also challenges them. Nirmala Erevelles (2000) points out the problematic way disability as a “real” and embodied system problematizes the post-structuralist turn in critical theories of education. She points out that “notwithstanding the emancipatory possibilities that these studies [of dynamics of class, race, gender and sexuality] promise, the voices of the disabled students as oppositional subjects or agents have remained conspicuously absent in this diverse array of counternarratives”

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(p. 31). When looking at a medical or deficit model when we define a person, and we don't give depth and or acknowledge lived experiences of individuals. Sitcoms rely on those categories of difference and typecasting to shortcut people's connection to the story being presented. But by being able to share the story of this family, or the live of some movie biopic such as *My Left Foot*, we can push into the complexity of individuals to defy definition by difference. Erevelles offers that by exploring the voices of disabled students we can offer “radical possibilities” for critical theories of education. How so? Well, Erevelles points out “since disabled persons with severe or multiple disabilities may be dependent on technology as well as nondisabled people to communicate, would not the disruption of humanists version of the stable, coherent, and individualistic subject produce corresponding disruption to traditional notions of ‘human agency?’” (p. 32). Though not disabled herself, Erevelles recognizes on solidarity that disabled scholars and activists have struggled to “claim space, voice, and power to disrupt the normative ideals of the social world that has historically ignored them. To achieve this end, they have sought to define a disability culture that is based on the recognition of their *different* bodies- not in spite of their disabilities but because of them.

JJ isn't JJ without the humor, interactions and struggles he experiences through his cerebral palsy and his struggle to express his voice through his communication board, his mother's advocacy and Kenneth as his mediator to the social world around him. This also parallels the idea of the “hero's journey” style of narration where we see overcoming struggles in the dynamics of a family as he grows up and out as a transitioning teenager to adult.

In following the journey from nondisabled to disabled Simi Linton, writer and disability researcher and advocate points out that politic of the body in her book *My Body Politic: A Memoir*. In recognition of her new reality as a physical disabled person in the 1970s after a car

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wreck, we hear “there was nothing ethereal about me now. I had become an assemblage of body parts, notable only if they worked or not” (p. 6). By reading her transformation we can see both the outsider and insider perspective and insights. Her narrative gives us a pathway to not only sympathy but much truer emotion of empathy.

The problem, as I came to understand it, was not that I couldn’t walk; it was that the society was configured for those who do walk, see, hear, etc. It would take me a while longer to learn how entrenched the patterns of discrimination are, and how solid and purposeful the disability community was. (p. 54).

Linton has focused on her own journey and those of others in the fight for not only social reconstruction of what is part of a functioning and accepted citizenry, but also how her difference strengthens her, makes her the woman she is today. She expresses that:

We can’t wait for this century to unfold to reveal the truths in this forecast. We will have to act quickly to mark the line— to state for the record who is and who is not part of the community, the public, and the citizenry. From there it will take affirmative actions of a new and as yet unwritten form to make inclusion, integration, and participation a given of the twenty-first century (p.245).

Much like the power of memoir to live inside someone’s skin is for the written word, stories and narratives in TV, and movies give audiences the chance to see the “other’s” perspective from inside. In the case of the DiMeo’s we get to glimpse inside the family dynamic to build the empathy needed for transgressing borders of difference.

Resolution: The last commercial

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Comedy is a “safe” way where the public, or “viewing audience” can be exposed to disability and the challenges families and communities experience. This window into lived experience, amplified through the medium of sitcoms and lens of showrunner and writers helps develop a deeper understanding of the similarities of “other” in a poignant, funny and nonthreatening way. We can use this as a jumping off point to raise the consciousness of nondisabled audience and give recognition of commonality for the many people who experience disability. Micah Fowler summarizes his thoughts to New Mobility this way:

I hope as people watch Speechless they get to know JJ as a very normal person to the point that they don't even see his disability, but his humor and personality and that they can bring that into their own lives. One of the things I'm most committed to is to showing people that you don't have to act differently or be uncomfortable around disabled people. We are so normal. Just say, Hi!” Look beyond the physical or other limitations and see the real person, the heart, the personality, the love and yes, even the humor (Broverman, 2016).

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Appendix A: Speechless Questions

1. Describe yourself and your family briefly. How would you describe yourself in a sentence?
2. Have you seen people on TV and movies that look like you (or your child) or have some of the limitations you (your child) might experience?
3. What tv show or movies was it? (If you can remember)
4. Have you seen ABCs "Speechless?"
5. What did you think of it?
6. Knowing it's a sitcom and sort of magnifies people's personalities what do you like or dislike as accurate about the characters in the show?
7. Do you have a favorite moment?
8. Anything that bothers you about the show?
9. What do you think of the relationships in the show.. the family, brother-sisters, school-family, school friends, and JJ-- any of those?
10. Anything else you would like to share?

Thank you so much for your time. When I am done with the paper if you want me to share it with you let me know!!

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Appendix B: Informal movie/TV list generated from social media discussion

Movies/Documentary:

A Patch of Blue

An Affair to Remember (paralysis)

Born this way

Children of a lesser God

Fathers and Daughters (TBI);

Forrest gump

I am Sam

Johnny Belinda (deafness) - Jane Wyatt

Miracle worker

Mozart and the Whale

My left foot

Of Mice and Men

Radio

Riding the bus with my sister

Rj Mitte on breaking bad (cp)

Scent of a Woman with Al Pacino.

Simon Birch

Temple Grandin

The Bubble Boy,

The other sister

Three faces of Eve

Tom Cullen in the Stand

Who's eating Gilbert grape

TV:

American housewife

Big Bang (ocd/ Aspergers)

Glee

Life Goes On

Monk (ocd)

Parenthood (Aspergers)

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West Wing -Marlee Matlin

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- Maya fights fo JJ's rights (1:34) <http://abc.go.com/shows/speechless/video/most-recent/VDKA3393924>
- JJ asks Claire out <http://abc.go.com/shows/speechless/video/most-recent/VDKA3507209>